Title: **The Memory Thief**

Prologue

Memories were no longer private.

They could be extracted, digitized, and sold. A first kiss? Worth a month’s rent. The smell of your mother’s cooking? Priceless to someone who never had it. And if you had nothing left to give, well... someone would find a way to take more.

This is the world I live in. And I’m the one they call when memories go missing.

Chapter 1: The Market

The scent of lavender and ozone hits me the moment I step into the district. Neon signs flash overhead: *MemoraTech*, *ReLive*, *Evertrue*. Each storefront promises a better life, one memory at a time. I pass a woman pressing her fingers to a sleek extraction pad, tears running down her cheeks as a technician downloads the image of her wedding day.

I try not to judge. We've all been there. You give up a piece of yourself to survive.

My name's Mara. I’m what they call a "diver"—licensed, barely legal, and very good at finding things that were never meant to be lost.

Chapter 2: A New Client

He walked into my office like he owned the place. Tall, early 40s, clean suit, messy eyes. The kind of guy who’d seen things and tried to bury them under expensive cologne.

"You Mara Lane?"

"Depends. You a cop?"

He smirked. "Worse. Government contractor. I need you to retrieve a stolen memory. High-level clearance. Sensitive."

I leaned back in my chair. "Stolen how?"

"We think it was extracted without consent. A black-market job. The memory contains classified data. Location of something called 'Vault Zero.' Ever heard of it?"

I hadn't. And that scared me.

Chapter 3: The Dive

Diving into a memory is like lucid dreaming in reverse. You enter someone else's recollection, but you can't change anything. Just observe. Follow. And try not to lose your mind in the process.

The memory was raw—jagged around the edges. Extracted poorly. Whoever stole it had done it fast and dirty.

Flashes: a cold lab. Rows of pods. Screaming. Then silence.

Then I saw something that made my breath catch in my throat: a child, no older than seven, locked inside a pod. Eyes open. Aware.

She looked right at me.

Impossible.

Chapter 4: Vault Zero

I started digging. Vault Zero wasn't in any official database. But in the undernet—the encrypted web of hackers and shadow archivists—it was legend. Supposedly a project to store the memories of the dead, so their knowledge could live on.

Problem was, someone had figured out how to *wake* them.

Chapter 5: Echoes

Ever since the dive, I'd been hearing things. Seeing flashes that weren't mine. The child. The lab. The scream.

I wasn't just diving into memories anymore. They were diving into me.

Chapter 6: The Ghost Network

I found others. Divers who had seen the same girl. Heard the same scream. We pieced it together: Vault Zero wasn't a storage system. It was a prison.

And someone was trying to break the inmates out.

Chapter 7: The Collector

The man behind it all was called The Collector. A rogue neurotech genius. Believed memories were more than data—they were *souls*. He thought if he could gather enough, he could bring the dead back.

He'd already started with the children. Forgotten orphans. Their memories stolen. Their minds repurposed.

He wasn't reviving them. He was *rebuilding* them.

Chapter 8: Confrontation

I confronted him in the ruins of the old Memory Bank, a concrete labyrinth beneath the city.

"You're playing god," I said.

"No," he replied, smiling. "I'm just reminding the world that we are more than the sum of our choices. We are what we remember."

And then he showed me the final memory.

Chapter 9: The Truth

It was mine.

I was one of them. A child of Vault Zero. Rescued. Rewritten. Given new memories to forget the pain.

Everything I thought I knew was a lie.

Chapter 10: Reclamation

I had a choice. Walk away and keep the life I had... or dive deeper, reclaim the memories that made me who I really was.

I chose the truth.

It hurt. But in the end, it made me whole.

Epilogue

Vault Zero was exposed. The Collector disappeared into the net. And me?

I kept diving. Because people deserve to know who they really are. And sometimes, the only way forward is to go back.

To be continued...